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My Own Hero

By LK Levine

After many agonizing family discussions, several years ago, in the late 1990's, and in the face of my father's declining health, the decision was made to move my parents, Jo and Oscar Levine, from their Chicago condo of thirty-five years to an assisted living center located nearer my only sister, Vicki Levine Josephson. In preparing for the move, several storage lockers were cleaned out and the contents sorted through. What would be saved, what thrown out, what donated?

Thus it was that I received a call one day, Vicki laughing and crying and so excited I could barely understand her. Among Passover dishes, luggage, old student paintings of mine, and 35 years' accumulation of general stuff, was a 1940's office file box. Inside, still in chronological order, were hundreds of letters, postcards, and v-mails that my father had written my mother during the course of his military service in World War II.

After receiving Mom's permission to read them, Vicki began, and told me that once she started she could do nothing else until she had read through the entire batch. She was amazed, as was I, when it came my turn to read them. The person we discovered in these decades-old letters was not the father we knew. While the love shared by my parents was always obvious, we truly had no idea of its depth; nor could we know what a romantic, poetic, passionate person the young Oscar had been.

When Oscar was drafted on March 18, 1943, he was three days shy of their first wedding anniversary. At that time he was 29, a decade or more older than most of the "boys" with whom he served. His concern for his younger fellow servicemen was an integral part of Oscar, who he is. He never mentioned that when he was finally liberated from the POW camp, he himself still able to walk, he carried a much younger man out. After the war, this soldier did in fact find my folks and met my mother, who has since told me about it. This concern was an extension of his persona at home. Oscar, even though the youngest in his own family, became the patriarch and continued to care in a very paternal way for his beloved Mother, his three older sisters and their families, and in fact all of my mother's brothers and sisters and children as well. His devotion to his in-laws was just as deep as to his own mother – and better than that does not exist in this world.

Oscar is now a month away from his 93rd birthday; Jo turned 87 this past August. They have lived to see all three of their beloved grandchildren marry, and will be great-grandparents for the first time in the spring of 2007. While the ravages of time, and, especially, the health problems begun at Bad Orb, continue to take their toll, the one thing that is absolutely unchanged is my father's love for my mother. It is a teaching with which we have truly been blessed.

Below is the text of one of the most moving of these letters, in which my father writes of his liberation from the German Prisoner of War Camp.

APRIL EASTER SUNDAY APRIL 1, 1945 Dearest Darling,

My first letter as a free man once again and try as I might to explain this feeling I find it impossible. The only way I can express myself is to say I feel like I was reborn. My heart has been so full of joy in the last few days that if something doesn't happen soon to settle me down I'll burst. To think that only three days ago I was in great doubt as to whether I'd see my darling once again for it was then, Thursday, March 28 that the tides turned like a miracle from heaven.

That morning at 7 a.m. we were herded out like a bunch of cattle to start in a march; for how long or how far no one knew; and as far as food for this march we knew would be a secondary item with Jerry*. Being a P.O.W. for 3 1/2 months taught us that we were fortunate in having as a commanding officer a medical captain, Captain Morgan by name, who was once a paratrooper officer and also a P.O.W. We were under his command, all 1200 of us American noncoms. It was his plan to stall for time, as we knew our boys were only 12 miles away. So it was decided that as soon as we start marching, men fall on their faces as if sick. So they did, and it wasn't all an act, as 90 percent of us were in no condition to start this march and had we started 75 percent would never be alive to tell about it. So our little hoax started and men were falling like flies and still other men trying to help their comrades. Jerry was so bewildered by our little scheme that all of us were ordered back to the barracks – and at this time things started to pop. Jerry started to scream and our captain yelled even louder; all this time our plan was working (stalling for time). It was early afternoon and right after that it was conveyed to us that German high officials pulled out of camp and Captain Morgan took over command. Our troops now were supposed to be only a few miles away. Then and there for the first time did we realize that we were going to be freed. Of course when I tell this story I only refer to the American compound but we have all nationalities here and it was our hoax that saved their lives too. Total amount of prisoners in camp about 8000. This is a quick summary of a long story and a fine movie script it would make but it wouldn't be believed. Hope soon to give you all the details in person.

As you recall in the early part of my letter I referred to Thursday as a miracle and that it turned out to be. It was towards afternoon that I found out through the Protestant chaplain that our Passover starts that evening. Realizing it was my Dad's yahrzeit, I got together 10 Jewish boys and said the closing Kaddish . It will surprise you to learn that my sincerest prayer was to be in American hands by Dad's yahrzeit so I could observe it, and that I was granted. Also I am sure you are well aware of the fact that Passover celebrates the liberation of the Jews from bondage; and here on the same day Jew and Gentile alike were again delivered from bondage

Then again let's look at another side. It was Holy Thursday, Good Friday to follow. It was on Good Friday that we saw our first G.I. fighting man and were officially liberated. So all people in their particular faiths saw this miracle and I am sure their prayers were answered. And believe me, praying there was. God has been very kind to us and as long as I live I'll never forget it.

With the exception of losing a little weight I am none the worse for this experience and with a few weeks of good G.I. chow I'll be as good as new. As a matter of fact, after having a few luxuries in the last few days, like sweets and cigarettes, I feel like I can lick an entire German company single-handed. Today is a busy day in camp. G.I. fighting men all over the place examining the conditions we were living under and food supplies coming in truckloads. At this writing our sick men are being evacuated and in a few days we are to follow. The only thing holding us up is transportation and that is being used to chase Jerry. He is running so fast!

I don't think I'll be able to mail this for a day or so but will do so as soon as possible and from then on I'll write regularly. Tell all my friends I am well and send me their addresses as I haven't any of them. I discarded them before I was captured, especially the ones in the service and Rabbi Perlow and Rabbi Etner in London.

Not one word have I said about missing and loving you but I am sure you know what's in my heart. It was your love and God's grace that pulled me through this and I am a much better man for it. Keep well my darling.

Please dear God watch over my darling for a little while longer and I'll take her off your hands, "to have and to hold till death do us part". Love, Oscar

*German troops

Memories of the Greatest Generation

By Gwendolyn Davis

For the last time, my hands close the cover of your World War II Service album I have just finished making. It is my hope you'll like it and see the love I put into every page. I know I promised to make it for you long ago. You sent the captions, pictures, and mementos with your trust of an album's completion. And there your pictures sat. For years. My children were raised; my marriage disintegrated; and my own Air Force Service career came to its end. And still the album waited to be born.

And then it was Time. Like long-buried seeds sprout when the Winter Rains pour, I lit my Chanukah candles and marveled at the Light that comes into the world when a few good men are willing to fight for Truth and Right. And I thought of you. Suddenly, I was moved to get the album completed as quickly as possible. Undeterred by the fact that I had never put together a scrapbook such as I was imagining, I shopped for scrap-booking materials. I came home burdened with exotic papers, trinkets and ribbons. I literally worked night and day with single-minded obsession to complete this book as quickly as possible.

I wanted to convey to you how much I valued your contribution to the World War II effort. It doesn't matter whether you or the millions of other Allied men wanted to leave their homes and families or whether they were forced to board ships for far, distant lands. They went. They fought. Duty. Honor. Country. And all that. Yes, all that. I valued it too. I still do.

Your duty and your sacrifice really did assure that I would be raised in a world "free from want and fear." My post-war childhood was a world of innocence and freedom that my own children do not know. Yes, you made sure that I had my share of No's (way-too-many for my liking at the time). And you disciplined me often enough to be sure your values and mother's (all of Society's values, actually!) would be inculcated in me. I was to be Honest and Kind and Respectful. I was to love G-d. I was to be Responsible for myself and my world. Study hard. Do the Right Thing. Be Tolerant of others who are different, for they are really just like me. I was as indulged and cherished as the rest of my Boomer Generation.

And if, when we grew up, we Boomers discovered that our world still had its share of problems, it didn't change the fact that the Greatest Generation had provided us with a safe beginning to our lives. At least that was true in my own case. I wanted nothing. I feared only the Bogey Man under my bed and the giant, Louisiana cockroaches living in the back yard. I grew up with the solemn expectation that I had the right to speak my mind (and boy, did I speak it!) and to worship in any way I chose without fear of governmental censure. Thank you for that. Thank you from the bottom of my heart that you served and fought so that all peoples would have the Freedoms that America holds dear.

I've kept my promise, Daddy. I finally made your album. And you kept the promises you made to me. But the most important promise you made to me was made long before I was ever born. You stood up against the Darkness that threatened the whole world. You stood up against Fascism--Italian-Fascism (Mussolini) and German Fascism (Hitler and his Nazis). You may have been but one candle, but combined with a million others, you lit the known world and banished

Darkness. Some of those other candles were extinguished in the battles of World War II, but you and others of the Greatest Generation survived to spread your Light into a new world. A few, like you, still burn today. The whispers of smoke from their Lights call to me and others who are listening, "Remember. Remember. Let it not be in vain."

Perhaps, I'm too emotional, but these thoughts are not mere, maudlin sentiment, despite the pathos in my tone. The threat is very real. Today, Darkness creeps back into our world. Fascism (Islamofascism) again shouts that it will destroy us and everything we stand for. And I fear we will have to fight again. Soon.

I look at Alex, your cynical, scrawny, soon-to-be seventeen year old grandson and wonder if he will have the courage and will to fight another World War—this time a war against an ideologically-minded enemy so bent to further its cause that they are willing to throw out the traditional rules of war which protect societies against wanton barbarism. Pronouncing it "nice," Alex reads your war album with the detachment of youth and ignorance. It is just the stuff of history books for him. He doesn't see the fingers of Darkness lurking in the shadows of his life and future.

Darkness will not win this fight. I have to believe that. I have to believe that G-d will raise up another heroic generation, who like you, whether willing or forced, will fight against fascism—fighting against the darkness, lighting candles one by one.

Thank you again, Daddy. Thank you for the quiet Duty you display day after day. Someone noticed. Someone is grateful. Thank you for your love, your support, your patience, and your purpose. Thank you.

Jewish War Veterans Thankful for Troops

By Master Sgt. Denice Rankin

This November, members of the 182nd Field Artillery Battalion, who are at their mobilization station in Fort Dix, N.J., were fondly remembered and treated to a holiday dinner with all the trimmings by veterans from New Jersey.

Members of the Jewish War Veterans Post 126, of Cherry Hill, N.J., know how to serve their country and fellow troops. With a crew of about 50 Jewish War Veterans and another 30 or so volunteers, the group sponsored the third annual Thanksgiving dinner for deploying military members.

This year, the Michigan Soldiers pulled up to the table for dinner with Soldiers from the Missouri National Guard who are also at Fort Dix pending deployment to Iraq.

Hundreds of people gathered on the parking lot of Baron's Steakhouse in Clementon, N.J., to greet the soldiers as they arrived for the dinner. They also volunteered to assist with the dinner. According to Nelson L. Mellitz, a retired Army colonel with more than 30 years of service to include "tours" to Vietnam and Iraq, and a member of Post 126, they actually had to turn volunteers away because they didn't have enough room in the Steakhouse to support all the Soldiers and the volunteers.

Mellitz stated, "JWV Post 126 members got as much enjoyment in feeding the National Guard troops as I believe they did in eating the turkey. It was a pleasure for us to help in this little way to support the warfighter of the GWOT."

"These people are away from their families," said Eric Spevak, a New Jersey lawyer who organized the event for the third time with members of the Jewish War Veterans Post 126. "Even though they are from out of state, they're in South Jersey and we want them to know we care about them."

Capt. Damean McDowell, Company A, 182nd commander, expressed his gratitude for the dinner and warm reception. "We're not with our families, so whenever we get to go out in the community, it feels really good," stated McDowell. "It's a big morale boost."

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Our Chain of Service Continues to Grow

By Norman Rosenshein

The scene is both familiar and heart-wrenching and has been reenacted as long as mankind has gone to war. A young girl mourns her lost love, a warrior cut down in the prime of his life as he made the ultimate sacrifice for his country. The picture on the front page of the Jan. 1, 2007, edition of the Washington Post shows this timeless grief repeated at Arlington National Cemetery, as a young girl sits in front of the grave of her lost love, a young man who now lies beneath a simple white headstone topped with a Star of David.

This young Marine, Colin Joseph Wolfe, is but one of the most recent in the long line of Jewish service men and women who have served, and in many cases, given their lives, to defend America in a long chain that stretches back to Dutch New Amsterdam in 1654 and predates the establishment of the United States. We can and must take great pride in this unbroken chain of service.

As those who founded our organization on March 15, 1896, did so to fight unjust perceptions that Jews did not serve in the Civil War, we must continue our struggle to proclaim to the world that Jewish service has always been an unbroken and sacred chain going back to the earliest days of Jewish life in America for over 350 years. Those who do not believe that Jews have served continue this calumny today, while Jews serve at all levels in today's military, from the deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan to the halls of the Pentagon. The mission of those veterans in 1896 must sadly still be our mission today.

The inspiration of this unbroken chain of service was always with me as I met with NATO officials on my recent trip to Europe. I am pleased to be able to share with the members of JWV that the NATO force well represents the ideals of defending democracy in the world wherever it is threatened by terrorism. Please be assured that recent changes in personnel at NATO continue to ensure that U.S. troops within the NATO forces remain under the command of senior American officers and are under senior U.S. control.

As I prepare to present testimony in March to the Joint Committees on Veterans Affairs, I will always keep this unbroken chain of service in mind as the JWV continues to fight for the rights that all service people, both Jewish and non-Jewish, have earned and to keep this covenant of Jewish service that has remained unbroken throughout the years. Therefore I will emphasize the need for mandatory funding to protect the rights of those who have served and champion the causes of women veterans, who now make up 15 % of our service people, and whose special needs must be addressed.

As we continue to add links to our chain of service, we must always remember those who have forged their links in previous battles. We must always continue to fight for the rights that they have earned through their service. We have a covenant that stretches back to those early Jews in New Amsterdam through to today's service people, the veterans of tomorrow, and beyond to conflicts yet unimagined in our day.

Due to advances in medicine, our service people are surviving wounds that would not have been survivable in previous conflicts. These returning veterans, injured beyond our previous imaginings, will further strain the ability of our veterans' health care to provide the services to all veterans that they have earned.

Those veterans who have made the ultimate sacrifice, such as CPL Wolfe, must always be honored for their service. Other veterans, who face the need for continuing service from the VA, must also be honored and their needs provided for from a grateful nation. As we tend to the needs of the veterans of the future, we pay homage to the service of that line of veterans stretching back to our earliest colonies.

“The Mission—the Veteran.”